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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach to wilderness education that facilitates a productive dialogue between the individual and elements of nature. During a 7- to 10-day period, participants are guided into intimate interactions with the elements of nature through body movement. Daily activities involve meditation, sensory activities, kinesthetic activities, and dance. These internalization and externalization activities lead the participant into the "encountering of his element." This encounter is a psychological process of identification with an element of nature. This whole daily process is finally completed, at the end of the day, by the use of symbolic drawing and writing in a personal journal. The daily process is presented under the theme "identification with one's own element" in the first days of field work, "identification with its opposite element" in the days to follow, and "identification with a blend of these elements" in the last few days. Several phenomenological studies of this approach used a self-report, an interview, and participant observation to explain the essence of the experience. It was found that: (1) the meaning of an element or symbol for a participant takes the form of a universal symbol; (2) participants had a different kind of relationship with their blend element in relation to the other two elements; and (3) the first identification experience with an element tends to naturally lead the participants to identify with an opposite element, and eventually, to live the blend experience. (KS)

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WHEN NATURE SPEAKS TO ME HERSELF

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Abstract

This paper describes an approach to wilderness education that has to do with establishing living conditions in nature so that « when nature speaks to me about herself, she speaks about me and, in particular, says what could only be said by her ». In this approach, the participants are guided into intimate personal interactions with the elements of nature. They are shown how to focus inward so as to increase awareness of their inner state through meditative practices and movement awareness activities. Once a certain state of interiority is induced, the activities that follow are then focused on establishing an « active relationship » with the natural environment. This « active relationship » refers to situations in which participants are invited to interact actively with nature through movement in order to embody qualities of elements of nature such as trees, rocks or clouds. Through these explorations of movement, the intention is that participants experience, at a very primary non-reflexive level, various degrees of connectedness with elements of nature. Finally, the participants are asked to objectify their experience by making naive symbolic drawings and writing short descriptive passages.

A qualitative method of scientific inquiry inspired by phenomenology is used to develop a better understanding of profound meanings of the educational experience in a wilderness environment in order to clarify its specificity as concerns personal development.

Introduction

In this article, we describe an approach that is being developed through our current research activity in wilderness education. Our study is aimed at better understanding the phenomenon of interaction between the individual and the natural environment from a human development perspective. We want especially to emphasize the unique nature of the educational experience in a wilderness environment, that is, to understand what, as concerns personal development, comes into play in this particular context, and solely in this context. We first describe the approach used with participants during field work conducted over the last few years. In the second section, this is followed by a brief description of our theoretical and research perspectives. In the third and last section, we describe some elements of our understanding of the meaning of the interaction between the individual and the wilderness environment.

Field Work

Our field work generally consists of a seven to ten-day period during which eight to twelve participants are guided into intimate interactions with the elements of nature. The approach used is inspired by the work of Halprin (1975) in the field of dance education. In this approach, interaction with nature is experienced through body movement or, more precisely, through the body dancing as elements of the environment.

Each morning, participants are shown how to focus inward so as to increase awareness of their inner state through meditative practices and somatic awareness activities. The somatic phenomenon refers to « the human being as experienced by himself from the inside » (Hanna, 1986). The participants are guided into somatic awareness activities taking the form of simple body movements in nature (ex.: arising from a

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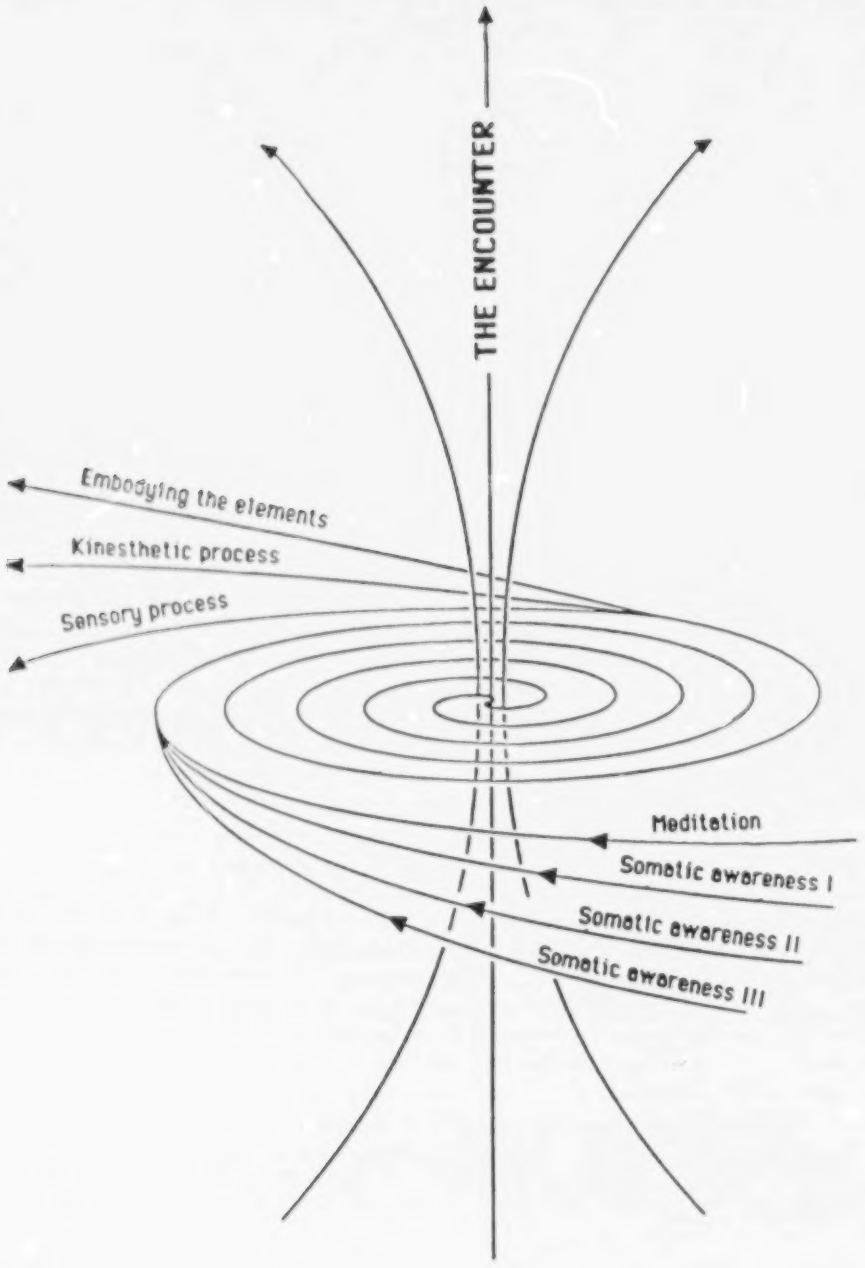
lying position). These movements, executed at an extremely slow pace, are often seen as sequences of micro-movements. This process leads to the awakening of one's own sensitivity to his inner experience. It is labeled the process of internalization and is schematically represented with the image of a spiral pointing inwards. From an external point of view, it presents itself as a passive relationship with the environment in which one stands.

Once this state of interiority is induced, afternoon activities focus on establishing an « active relationship » with the natural environment. This « active relationship » refers to situations in which participants are invited to interact actively with nature through three types of activities. First, sensory activities are situations in which the participant will look, listen, taste, touch and smell the bark of different trees or various rocks, for example. Second, the kinesthetic activities are situations in which previous sensory experiences are translated into body movements. The softness experienced through the hand gliding along a certain bark may generate a movement of stretching of the arms. At this point, it consists of rather free movement explorations. The intention is to amplify sensory experiences through proprioceptive experiences. Third, the embodiment of specific elements of nature are situations in which body movement develops beyond free explorations. It becomes more organized movement on specific themes such as a particular tree or rock, for example. Stretching arms (for softness of the bark) may develop into opening and closing of arms to embody a particular unfolding of branches. These three types of afternoon activities are actually experienced as connected to one another and form what is labeled the process of externalization. It is schematically represented by the image of a spiral pointing outwards. Through these explorations of movement, participants experience, at a very primary non-reflexive level, various degrees of connectedness with elements of nature.

Two important aspects complete the description of the daily process of the field work. The first aspect refers to the idea that the internalizing process is seen intimately linked to the externalizing process. The internalization is indeed approached as preparatory to the externalization; and the externalization is considered meaningful only if lived in narrow association with the interiority. This idea of connectedness is schematically represented by the image of the two spirals previously introduced, which are now superimposed one upon the other: the spiral pointing inwards connects in its center to the spiral developing outwards. This is done to facilitate the work with body movement since, for most persons, embodying qualities of elements of the natural environment is not an habitual way to experience nature. Linking expression with interiority is also done to accentuate the psychological function of this approach. Body movement and dance is approached in terms of its profound meaning for the participant.

The second aspect to complete the description of the daily process of the field work is more abstract. It refers to the idea that morning (internalization) and afternoon (externalization) activities are approached with the intention to lead the participant into the « encountering of his element ». This encountering is not viewed as an activity such as the activities of the internalization or the externalization processes. It is rather seen as what emerges from the interplay between interiority and expression. It is the experience of a particular connivance or complicity between the person and a very specific element of nature. It is a psychological process of identification with an element. For the person, it is the creation of his dance of the element, that is, a clear sequence of movements with a beginning, a development and a closure. This encounter is different from the previous movement explorations of the spiral of externalization. It is the appropriation of a true symbol of the depth dimension (Progoff,1973), an experience of a different order than the previous explorations. It is experienced on another plane. The encounter is schematically represented by the image of lines of force passing through the common central point of the spirals described here above as connected one to the other. These lines are directed perpendicular to the spirals plane. The whole spirals system can possibly be better understood with the use of the analogy of the induction phenomena in physics. Electro-magnetic induction is the process by which, for example, an electric current (the encounter) in a conductor is created when it is exposed to the variation of a magnetic field (internalization-externalization process).

This whole daily process (internalization, externalization, encountering of element) is finally completed, at the end of the day, by the use of symbolic drawing and writing in personal journal. These activities accompany the basic movement approach with the intention of helping the participant to objectify his experience of identifying with an element of nature through movement. Symbolic drawings are indeed viewed as an extension of body movements experienced in the identification with an element. The



The interweaving of internalization and externalization processes and the induction of « The Encounter »

description of experience through writing has the same function, but is viewed as a step further into the appropriation of the meaning of one's primary experience of nature.

This daily process is presented under the theme « identification with one 's own element » in the first days of the field work, « identification with its opposite element » in the days to follow, and « identification with a blend of these elements » in the last few days. For example, Peter (a pseudonym) used the following three identification elements: shifting moss (first element), moss-covered rock surrounded by cherry trees (opposite element), and a stream winding through moss (blend element). This triple-theme approach is inspired by the work of Halprin (Ruthkowski, 1984) and by psychosynthesis (Assagioli, 1973).
The following description is presented as an example of identification with an element. This is a short excerpt from Peter's journal about his identification with shifting moss. It could also be called a description of a dance with the element:

> Near the lake, the sky was grey. Ducks were rocking on the surface of the water amongst the lilies. A few of them took off, singing. This is a nice welcome. I reached a vast clearing near the lake and continued my walk in grass and moss. Then I came to an area covered with moss that seemed to be floating or shifting. Walking with my eyes closed, I suddenly felt my feet sinking into the ground, as if I was off balance. There was a pleasant sensation as the ground moved under me. Further on, I reached a place where there was even more movement. There were ponds all around me. At each step, my feet made strange noises, like the sound of water being sucked away. I smelled strong odors of wet soil and marsh. I was sinking deeper still when a fear suddenly overcame me. I was alone and afraid of sinking so far that I would drown. But at the same time , I was filled with joy to be playing in the moss. So I quieted my fear because I could not resist playing with such movement of the earth.
>
> Then, I felt the movement again on more solid ground. It felt like a Tai Chi walk during which my legs became elastic, like contact between water, earth and sky. I was part of this overall movement, a pulse of life in a much larger whole.

This excerpt illustrates that participants are not asked to write about their understanding of their relationship with nature, but rather to objectify, by drawing and writing, their primary lived experience.

After the field work, each participant is asked to return to his material and to accomplish the last step of the approach using the following statement:

> This approach has to do with establishing living conditions in nature so that when nature speaks to me about herself, she speaks about me and, in particular, says what could only be said by her. And when nature dances with me, I dance with her as I am able only with her.

This statement is translated into the following question: when nature was speaking to me about herself, dancing with me, what was told that could not otherwise have been said? The participants then produce an answer to this question in the form of a metaphor. The following example is taken from Peter's experience with moving mosses.

> I am shifting moss. I am like a floating island, clinging to the other moss. I live in a country of swamps and odors of wet soil, where I make sounds of water being sucked away while joyfully playing with the water under me. Sometimes I sink in a little too much, and then fear overcomes me -- the fear of drowning, disappearing between the water and the earth, which might close over me like a trap. But I continue to play with the water, quieting my fear. My movement is elastic, like a contact between water, earth and sky.

This work is done for each one of the three identification experiences: one's own element, the opposite element and the blend element. These three statements of the essence of their experience, the actual dances with the elements, the three symbolic drawings and the basic raw descriptions of their lived experience have the primary function to sustain the participants in their quest into the appropriation of the meaning their primary experience of nature. This basic material then becomes the raw data we use for our research process we will now briefly describe in the following section.

Theoretical Research Perspectives and Methods

Theoretical research perspectives

The main theoretical context for this study is that of phenomenology (Husserl, 1859-1938), from which stems phenomenological psychology, whose founder Giorgi (1931-) defined it as being the study of phenomena as experienced by enlightened human beings, and the research methods for the study of these phenomena (Giorgi, 1985). Our focus is thus the *Lebenswelt*, which in Husserlian terminology designates the world originally lived, which comes before what is learned objectively in the world. On the other hand, the eidetic nature of the phenomenological approach to research helps us distinguish the essential experience of intimate interaction with nature from that which is accidental. What we are actually seeking to determine, through the diversity of the experiences, is their fundamental structure.

Crompton and Sellar (1981) and Iozzi (1989) analyzed several studies dealing with the affective domain of the educational experience in a natural environment. However, we found only one phenomenological research study on such an experiment carried out in the wilderness. Segal (1988) conducted the «communion with nature» experiment on six adults who had had previous wilderness experience. He describes how these experiences result in what he calls «consciousness-raising on the sensory, emotional and spiritual levels».

Methods and techniques

As mentioned earlier in the description of our approach in the field, we propose activities encouraging the participants to explore their relationship with elements of nature (e.g. trees, clouds, moss, etc.) through body movement, and more specifically, dance. The focus is placed on a relationship that is experienced through the body, one that is felt rather than thought out. We give priority to what Merleau-Ponty called the pre-reflexive experience. Most of the participants taking part in the field works are adult volunteers who are not familiar with this approach, although they were generally at ease spending several days in a wilderness environment.

To collect data, we used three different techniques : 1) the self-report, 2) the interview, and 3) participant observation. The basic data we obtain are essentially descriptions of these experiences of identification with and embodiment of elements of nature.

For data analysis, the method used is that of phenomenological research (Giorgi, 1985). Using an essentially descriptive technique applied to raw research data, the objective is to explain the essence or structure of the experience, eliminating as much as possible any philosophical or cultural presupposition. The results are presented in a descriptive format and define the basic structure and the essential components of the phenomenon studied.

The first on-site experiment was conducted in summer 1987 as part of a doctoral research project. Five men and four women aged 24 to 44 participated in this preliminary systematic study, which was intended to be exploratory. A second on-site experiment was conducted in fall 1990 with 16 Secondary V students as part of their physical education course. Furthermore, between 1988 and 1991, we conducted six seven-day wilderness experiments with groups of ten university students and, although these studies were not systematic, the reports written by these participants were important in the development of our understanding of wilderness experience. Lastly, when the 1991 conference is held, we will be in the middle of the first year of a three-year research program funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. At this time, we will be able to assess the preliminary results of the analysis of the raw data collected on-site between August 14 and 23, 1991, with nine new participants.

Some Elements of our Understanding of the Meaning of Wilderness Experience

This section is aimed at presenting some elements of the understanding gained about the phenomenon of personal growth through explorations of individuals intimately interacting with a wilderness environment. This understanding was gained through a careful study of each set of the three identification elements for each of the nine participants that have taken part in our first systematic field study. For the purpose of this article, discussion is limited to three of the aspects derived from this study: 1) the universal aspect of identification symbols, 2) the specific nature of the blend element and 3) the natural harmonization process.

The Universal Aspect of Identification Symbols

This aspect refers to the fact that the meaning of a symbol for a participant ultimately takes the form of a typical or universal theme. Within the context of this study, the term « symbol » refers to identification elements. For Peter, then, shifting moss (first element), moss-covered rock (opposite element) and the stream winding through moss (blend element) are three identification symbols. In their descriptions, the participants make explicit reference to the universal aspect of their identification symbols: Chantal's rock--masculinity, Bernard's blade of grass--life, Peter 's stream-- rebirth, Carl's mushroom--a hero 's adversary, and Laurent 's volcano lava--masculinity. These universal themes are transpersonal (beyond the personal). Jung (1963) called them archetypes, while others before him have evoked the idea of mythical images (Campell, 1968).

Thus, the « universal aspect » refers to the tendency of such symbols to unfold toward the revelation of their ultimate meaning, which was not necessarily revealed at the time of the identification experience; rather, it tended to be revealed throughout the three identification experiences. The meaning of Peter's first identification element--shifting moss--began to appear more explicitly during his identification experience with his opposite element, the moss-covered rock. For Peter, as for most of the participants, the blend element experience was a special moment in that it revealed the ultimate meaning of the first identification, but also of the three identification symbols.

The Specific Nature of the Blend Element

This aspect refers to the different kind of relationship that most participants had with their blend element in relation to the other two elements. Three participants did not identify with a specific element of nature during the blend experience, but described a general state of being rather than the identification experience, as if their blend experience could not be objectified in a specific element of nature. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from Ann's description of her blend element experience:

> I left happy. Strolling along the trail, it was as if I didn't have to look for a blend element... I could feel both elements inside me so well... The blend element was like an entire forest, all of nature, inside me. I was happy because I had part of the forest inside me. I had the lilies (first element), and the wind (opposite element), but I also had nature's colors, energy and, somewhere, I could find a lake, a squirrel, moss and the entire forest...

This is not the description of an experience of identification with a specific element such as the lily or the wind; rather, it is in reference to an interior state of being, a centering experience, from which Anne observes that she can become the lily, the wind and all other elements of nature. One immediate consequence is that it is not possible for some of the participants to produce a metaphorical statement about nature speaking to them. In fact, it was this difficulty in writing such a statement that emphasized the specific nature of the blend experience.

The Natural Harmonization Process

The natural harmonization process is in reference to the idea that the first identification experience

with an element tends to naturally lead the participants to identify with an opposite element and, eventually, to live the blend experience. For instance, Peter's description of his dance of shifting moss--« Then, I felt this movement again on more solid ground »--also indicates that he was naturally moving on solid ground at the end of his first identification experience. The dance inspired by the first element naturally led him to dance the opposite element a few days later on the theme of stability embodied by the rock. Some participants even made explicit reference to the opposite element concept well before they were formally guided into this second identification experience. This also holds true for the blend experience.
The first element carries its opposite pole, which, once acknowledged as such, naturally initiates the synthesis process. It is as if in committing ourselves to exploring an element, we naturally encounter its opposite element, eventually experiencing the blend process. The three formal identification activities, involving the first, opposite and blend elements, explicitly proposed during the field work, are thus understood as transformational rituals to which participants commit themselves, as the self actively cooperating with the natural harmonization process. Such formal activities activate the natural process of personal growth.

Conclusion

Our study has led us to develop an approach to the educational experience in a natural environment as seen from the perspective of a productive dialogue between the individual and elements of nature. This interaction is experienced through the individual's participation in an interiorization-exteriorization processwhich emphasizes the place of a moving body as a sensory and feeling-oriented experience. This process helps the participants objectify their experience through symbols of identification with elements of nature(e.g. shifting moss). These symbols tend to reveal their meaning to the individual through typicaluniversal themes or mythical images (e.g. death-rebirth). The manifestation of a symbol occurs simultaneously in the direction of its polarity and eventually toward the harmonization of this bipolar structure.

These diverse aspects emphasize the idea that the use of symbolics, that is, the symbols of identification of a particular individual taken together, is an ideal way of fostering understanding of the profound meanings of the phenomenon of interaction with nature from a developmental viewpoint. Symbolics is a term that accurately conveys the dynamic nature of true symbols. We thus understand the primary role of dancing in nature as not solely the embodiment of elements themselves, but also as the embodiment of the dynamism and the intrinsic movement of symbols of the depth dimension.

About the specificity of this approach and wilderness experience, our more recent research activities lead us to the understanding that through and beyond the embodiment of the intrinsic movement of symbols of identification in nature, the individual embodies the creative process itself. The individual would develop a profound knowledge based on lived experience of the on-going creation of the universe and would also nourish a true sense of belonging to a whole which surpasses comprehension.

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